



Concurrence of the Council

The following letter from Mr. HARRY CHESTER has been for some time under the serious consideration of the Council, and it is thought that it may be interesting to the members of the Society at large.

Highgate, Nov. 28, 1851.

SIR,



BEING desirous that the attention of the Council of the Society of Arts should be drawn to a subject which I am persuaded is of considerable importance, and consistent with the Society's objects, I beg leave to request your perusal of the following exposition of my views, in order that, if you coincide with me in the opinion which I have just expressed, you may take a fitting opportunity of presenting the subject to the Council.

I have to propose that an effort should be made to develop existing, and to create new, institutions of the class commonly called Literary and Scientific Institutions, Mechanics Institutes, &c. and to affiliate them on the Society of Arts.

As some excuse for what may be deemed my temerity in making such a proposal, I may mention that I have had considerable experience in reference to National Education; and that I was one of the originators, and have been (from the origin of the Society) the President, of the Literary and Scientific Institution in this place.

There is now scarcely a town, or considerable village, which has not its Institution under some form and name; but, with very rare exceptions, the Institutions are generally in a languishing condition, both as to funds and as to usefulness. I do not mean to assert that they are of no use but merely that they are not half as useful as they might be.

The Exhibition has given us some very significant hints that it is not only the education of our poor children that needs to be improved; high and low, rich and poor, old and young, have all an education question to be solved; have all a very real and urgent need of knowledge, and of knowledge of that kind which a Literary and Scientific Institution, if fully developed, is well calculated to assist in affording.

I conceive that there are three grand defects which impede the usefulness and the strength of the Institutions.

- 1st. They are not sufficiently practical in their aims:
- 2ndly. They are isolated and have no means of combining with other Institutions for the common good:

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And 3rdly. They have no connexion with the great central associations which pursue under national auspices the objects of Literature, Science, and Art.

1st. They are not sufficiently practical. I conceive that a Literary and Scientific Institution ought systematically to investigate, and diffuse information respecting, objects of practical utility.

The Highgate Institution some years since fully investigated the subject of Cottage Gardens and Allotments; and the result was the establishment here of a considerable number of allotments upon a plan which has worked with complete success.

We are now making an enquiry into the domiciliary condition of our poor, and collecting information respecting the best means of improving it. The Institution itself will not undertake any building or other operations with a view to the improvement; but will ensure a full ventilation of the subject; and the result, in all probability, will be that, (as in the case of the allotments) the business of Improvement will be effectually taken up by some of those who will be moved to the work by the information which the Institution will furnish.

I need not point out how rapid a progress would be made, in all parts of the country, in improving the dwellings of the poor, in sanitary measures, and in the use of scientific inventions, if the Local Institutions throughout the kingdom could be led systematically to aim at these very important objects. Questions also of political Economy (not politics) and Social Law, I conceive, should be treated in the theatres of these Institutions. How much the passing of useful laws would be facilitated if this were the case! Not to be tedious, I would instance the Laws of Partnership, of Bankruptcy, of Patents, of Master and Servant, as suitable for discussion by competent persons in such places. And again, how little are the great mass of the middle classes acquainted with the useful inventions which (e. g.) receive medals from the Society of Arts! Why should not these be systematically introduced to the notice of the Institutions?

The Highgate Institution has entered upon this branch of duty and is preparing to have a descriptive exhibition of the various applications of gas, to lighting, warming, cooking. How very few persons have ever seen a gas-cooking apparatus! what ludicrous prejudices are entertained on this subject! I cannot but think then that the strength and usefulness of the Institutions would be greatly increased if they could be moved to be more practical in their aims, and to labour (in a due proportion) in the directions to which I have adverted.

2ndly. They are isolated and have no combination for the common good. The evils of this isolation are too obvious to need any comment: and many attempts have been made to combine the Institutions for the purposes of engaging lecturers, obtaining the use of apparatus, and putting into circulation books, works of art, natural objects, &c.

In Yorkshire a considerable association of Institutes exists; and I believe it is productive of good.

What we want, however, is a central office in London, to which we could

apply for advice, information, and assistance. Such an office might form an extensive staff of Lecturers, men eminent in their special subjects; might collect illustrative specimens, and diagrams; and on application supply the local Institutions with lecturers and lectures on almost any subject. By judicious *geographical* arrangements the most distant Institutions might be supplied at a reasonable rate with Lecturers whom they now are entirely unable to remunerate because they cannot ensure to them other engagements in the same neighbourhood.

Whether such an office as I have alluded to should be created for the purpose, or whether any existing body, such as the Society of Arts, could undertake it, I am unable to say.

But 3rdly, the Local Institutions have no connexion with the great Central Societies.

If the Institutions could be connected with the British Museum, the Association for the Advancement of Science, the Geological, Botanical, Zoological, and other Societies, whose objects may fairly be considered to come within the scope of the Institutions, I cannot but think that great good would result both to them, and to the Central Societies.

Above all others the Society of Arts appears to me to be a Society with which Institutions might unite, by affiliation, with mutual advantage.

I refrain from entering fully, at present, into this subject, because the Council, if they should approve of the idea, would not need my exposition of its merits; and because I am unwilling to add to the length of a letter too long already.

If you should be of opinion that the subject is one which the Council of the Society would be likely to entertain, you will have the goodness to make such use as you may think fit of what I have written in this letter.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

HARRY CHESTER.

GEORGE GROVE, Esq. *Secretary,*
Society of Arts.

